

# Language learning experience of first year English majors as they see it

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DOI:10.14232/edulingua.2019.1.2

The results of previous surveys carried out at the Department of English Language Teacher Education and Applied Linguistics of the University of Szeged show that the majority of English majors is not prepared enough for their studies, their level of proficiency and study skills are often not satisfactory, and they have difficulty in assessing their own strengths, weaknesses and the reasons for being unsuccessful (Doró, 2010). Arising from the previously mentioned conclusions, the present paper aims to find out more about first-year English majors' study skills, strategies and self-perception in the form of five semi-structured group interviews. The students' answers shed light on what aspects of studying students have problems with, how they monitor and adjust their own studying process, what their goals are and what methods they use to become more fluent speakers and better students.

**Keywords:** first-year students, English majors, TEFL, study skills, learning experience

## 1. Introduction

A growing body of literature has examined how first-year students experience entering higher education and freshman year. It has been suggested that the students may find it difficult to adjust to the fast-paced rhythm of higher education both from the point of view of managing their studying process and integrating into a new environment (see Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2011; Brock, 2010; van der Meer, Jansen, & Torenbeek, 2010). As a result, sometimes as much as 50% of the enrolled students fail at least one course during their first year (Doró, 2010; 2011a). One reason for this might be the fact that many students are not prepared for being a university student, and only later into the semester do they understand what kinds of problems they might be having (Doró, 2010). However, sometimes students fail to realize that they do not have adequate language proficiency for completing their studies. Despite the fact that their instructors meet students on a weekly basis and have a general impression of their knowledge and progress, there is still little published information on how students experience their first academic year as English majors (Doró & Szabó Gilinger, 2015). This paper arises from the intention to provide insight into the more subjective aspects of students' learning experience, namely, how they see their own progress, difficulties and struggles at the end of their first year, what motivates them at this point of their studies, what their ideal L2 self looks like, and what strategies they apply to become better language learners.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Motivation

Motivation is one of the key factors in the process of language learning, which, according to Gardner's socio-educational model, contains three elements: effort to learn the language, desire to achieve success, and positive affect, that is, enjoying the process of studying (Gardner, 2001). In addition to being a complex concept itself, it is also intertwined with other factors in language learning, such as autonomy and self-regulation. Without motivation, it is difficult to persist in studying a language and dedicating time and energy to it (Csizér & Kormos, 2014). An important theory in the context of language learning is Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System, which is comprised of three components: the Ideal L2 Self (how the learner visualizes themselves speaking the L2 in the future), the Ought-to L2 Self (the goals the student thinks they should achieve and the qualities they think they should possess) and the L2 Learning Experience. Dörnyei emphasizes the necessity of helping students create the Ideal L2 Self. This is particularly important because the level of student's motivation is determined by their Ideal L2 self and their attitude towards language learning (Kormos & Csizér, 2008), although other factors, such as the materials used, the tasks, or the students' involvement in the tasks also play an important role. The teacher is a key figure in the process of motivating students, as it is their job to create a pleasant atmosphere, choose tasks that stimulate intrinsic motivation, give motivating feedback, use cooperative strategies, promote learner autonomy and create realistic learner beliefs (Dörnyei 1994; 2001).

There are various factors that can have a debilitating effect, preventing the learner from staying motivated. Kormos and Csizér (2014) report that adult language learners might be less optimistic about seeing themselves as successful future speakers of a language due to negative past experiences, whereas for someone to become a successful language user, being able to visualize oneself as such is a strong motivating factor. Anxiety can also affect motivation in a negative way, which is why it is important that teachers not only try to create a positive and reassuring atmosphere in the classroom but also help students cope with anxiety (Csizér & Piniel, 2016).

### 2.2 Self-regulation

Self-regulation has an important role in learning as early as in elementary school, but in higher education there is an even stronger emphasis on it. For meaningful learning to take place, and for mastering lifelong learning skills, active self-regulation is invaluable (van Eekelen, Boshuizen & Vermunt, 2005). Self-regulation entails "setting goals for upgrading knowledge; deliberating about strategies to select those that balance progress toward goals against unwanted costs; and, as steps are taken and the task evolves,

monitoring the accumulating effects of [the student's] engagement" (Butler & Winne, 1995, p. 245). According to Carver and Scheier's (1990) model (cited in Butler & Winne, 1995, p. 249), when a learner perceives a discrepancy between their current knowledge and their goals, the learner will choose their actions in a way that it reduces the discrepancy, either by modifying their goals, by implementing new strategies, or by completely abandoning the task and setting a new goal. According to Kormos and Csizér (2014), effective self-regulatory strategies require "the strength, relevance, and orientation of goals and positive self-related beliefs" (p. 281)

There are several factors that can hinder effective self-regulation. One of these is procrastination. A study conducted by Day, Mensink and O'Sullivan (2000) on 242 Canadian university students and 17 counseling clients reports that 32% of their sample were severe procrastinators, but some degree of procrastination was present in almost every student asked. The most procrastination was related to starting a task. Another phenomenon that has a negative effect on studying is academic self-handicapping, which is "an anticipatory, self-regulatory mechanism for coping with expected poor performance on academic tasks" (Urdu & Midgley, 2001). Academic self-handicapping is shown to be in connection "with low academic achievement, mental and behavioral withdrawal from school work, a pessimistic perception of academic performance, and perhaps depressed levels of self-esteem" (Urdu & Midgley, 2001, p. 123).

In a study with Hungarian students, Molnár (2002) concludes that the use of self-regulating strategies is in decline with age. Also, it seems that the older students get, the less motivated they become and it is likely that they are much less interested in school. An important factor that determines the presence or absence of self-regulatory strategies is whether the child studies alone or with the help of parents. D. Molnár (2015) points out that students who study without help at home can monitor their studying more effectively, use memorization more often and have more confidence in their own abilities. She emphasizes the role of schools and teachers in giving students the knowledge, means and space for self-regulation, saying that a supportive, but not overly controlling attitude is necessary from both parents and teachers. In their study about first-year university students in Hungary, D. Molnár & Gál (2019) report that the metacognitive strategies students use are planning the time dedicated to studying, asking for help, controlling effort and to a certain extent, overlearning and procrastination. They keep themselves motivated by developing their knowledge and skills, and they are reported to believe in their own abilities.

### *2.3 Learning strategies*

Learning strategies are defined as "specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques – such as seeking out conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task – used by students to enhance their own learning" (Scarcella &

Oxford, 1992, p. 63). They can be put in six groups, which are cognitive, memory, compensation, communication, metacognitive, affective and social strategies (Oxford & Crookall, 1989, p. 404). Strategies can vary according to factors such as the language learned, proficiency, gender, attitude, motivation, goals, personality traits, learning style, career orientation, teaching methods and many more (see Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). A few applicable learning strategies are organizing materials by outlining, rearranging or relating concepts to each other, or transforming (Ley & Young, 2001). Ley and Young (2001) cite two studies (Ley & Young, 1998; Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1986) which report that academically stronger groups used organizing strategies more often than academically weaker groups. Based on research carried out with 278 undergraduate students, Simsek and Balaban (2010) also conclude that the learning strategies used by successful students were more varied and better than those used by unsuccessful students.

As far as gender is concerned, although female students have been shown to apply more strategies and do so more often and more effectively than male students (Macaro, 2001; Simsek & Balaban, 2010; Zeynali, 2012), Oxford and Ehrman (1990) point out that psychological type, such as being Thinkers or Feelers, is an even more important variable.

Out-of-class learning of Japanese middle school students formed the central focus of a study by Lai, Zhu and Gong (2015) in which the authors found that the more out-of-class learning happens, the greater the confidence, the enjoyment of learning English, and the better the grades. Habók's (2016) research concludes that high-school students use metacognitive strategies most often, and there is a tendency to overuse memorization strategies, which might not be the most useful in language learning. This is why the importance of the teaching of strategies is emphasized as early as elementary school. Teachers might not be aware of what strategy their students use unless they inquire about it. Oxford and Crookall (1989) lists several ways of finding out about students' strategies, such as lists, interviews and think-aloud processes, note taking, diaries and surveys.

#### *2.4 Learner autonomy*

In language learning, autonomy refers to "learning practices involving learner's control over aspects of their learning, or, more broadly, learning that takes place outside the context of formal instruction" (Benson, 2013, p. 840). It means that the learner is not a passive observer in the learning process, but is responsible for what he or she learns, has a positive attitude towards learning and aims at being in control of and reflecting on the learning process as much as possible (Little, 1995). An important characteristic of the autonomous learner is that he or she "tends to integrate whatever he or she learns in the formal context of the classroom with what he or she has already become as a result of developmental and experimental learning" (Little, 1995, p. 175). Autonomous learners,

according to Little, are learners who “accept responsibility for their learning, are more likely to achieve their learning targets and maintain a positive attitude to learning in the future (1995, p. 176). Students have their own preconceptions about language learning, and knowing these preconceptions helps teachers understand students better. Being aware of these beliefs also makes it possible for teachers to help students discover and use more effective learning strategies (Horwitz, 1988).

There are several papers that discuss the topic of learner autonomy in school settings in Hungary. Szőcs (2019) reports that students feel responsible for their learning and staying motivated outside the classroom, but not so much for what they learn inside the classroom from each other, or when evaluating their own progress. Beliefs about autonomy and their autonomous practices are mismatched, and in the classroom students rely on the teacher as a person of authority rather than taking responsibility for their learning. Szőcs (2019) also points out that successful students opt for working individually, which shows a relationship between high achievement and autonomy. This is in line with Mezei’s (2008) results, which show that self-regulation is increased at a higher level of proficiency. Autonomy is also related to motivation, as the most motivated high achievers lost interest the least frequently (Szőcs 2019, p. 56), and, through self-regulatory strategies, motivation was shown to have an influence on autonomous learning (Csizér & Kormos, 2014).

Learner autonomy is even more emphasized during university years when the student has to realize, sooner rather than later, that they are in charge of the studying process and their academic performance depends on their ability to reflect on their methods and strategies, and their ability to draw conclusions in order to improve. In a paper written about first-year students’ language learning experience, motivation and self-evaluation, T. Balla & Bajnóczi (2018) come to the conclusion that first-year students do not yet see their responsibility in developing their language knowledge, thus, as they point out, instructors have an important role in helping students become more autonomous learners who can choose and use learning strategies effectively.

### **3. Changing student population**

Due to the introduction of the Bologna system in 2006, Hungarian higher education has undergone substantial changes. The effects and consequences of these changes are still perceptible, the problems that arose as a result are still tangible and some of them are yet to be solved. The situation may vary from department to department, but one thing that probably affects language departments the most is that students take a centralized school leaving exam, which means that those who gain admittance to universities in Hungary are of very diverse language backgrounds, and there is great variety in their command of English, as well as their goals. The departments only receive a list of admitted students shortly before the beginning of the academic year, but no information pertaining to the results of students’ school leaving exam or their language proficiency.

It might take weeks before instructors have a clear picture of their students' actual language knowledge, and the situation they face is often alarming, as many students overestimate their proficiency and are not aware of their shortcomings (T. Balla & Bajnóczi, 2018). For this reason, the Department of English Language Teacher Education and Applied Linguistics at the University of Szeged has been assessing incoming students' language knowledge in various forms for over 10 years, as early as the first week of the academic year. All BA students of English and American Studies, as well as the students of the English Language Teacher Training Program, must take a placement test administered at the beginning of the first semester of the first academic year. This test consists of a vocabulary and a grammar component aiming at giving both instructors and first-year students a clearer picture of their language proficiency (see Doró, 2011b). Students are also asked to fill in a questionnaire which aims to find out more about their language background (see T. Balla & Bajnóczi, 2015). In addition, in the course of their studies they are often asked to participate in surveys that seek to monitor their progress and give feedback on their current learning and experience. All of these, along with the present study, are attempts at staying informed about students' knowledge, motivation, and self-perception with the aim of helping students become more autonomous and more aware of their L2 self, the goals they are trying to achieve and the strategies they use to achieve them.

## 4. Methods

### 4.1 Participants

Twenty-four students (BA students and teacher trainees) were interviewed at the end of their second semester, of whom 16 were female and 8 were male students. Students attending two seminars called English Foundation and Use of English (see detailed description in 4.2) were selected by the author of the present paper based on their course results and grades. Five heterogeneous groups of 4-5 people were created so as to get as diversified insight into their learning experience as possible.

### 4.2 Course background

The students interviewed were taught two sets of courses by the author of the present paper, English Foundation 1 and 2, and Use of English 1 and 2. All of these are compulsory seminars for first-year students, and require constant preparation, the application of individual study skills and the integration of previous knowledge into the new topics. The weekly quizzes students write provide frequent feedback which helps students reassess their strategies and change them if necessary. Students' success in these two seminars can, therefore, be affected by their study habits and methods.



At the end of the first academic year (or at the end of the third semester in the case of teacher trainees) students are required to take the Academic English 1 exam (AE1). The exam measures four language components, including Writing, Speaking, Use of English and Reading Skills. The Use of English seminar is one of the several language classes which help students prepare for the Use of English component of the exam. The aim of the course is to review topics of grammar that are thought to cause students considerable difficulties, to help students improve their language competence and to support a systematic building of their vocabulary. In addition, as mentioned above, a substantial amount of time is dedicated to preparation for the AE1 through getting familiar with the required task types of the Use of English component (word formation, sentence transformation, open cloze, error correction).

English Foundation 1 and 2 are not explicitly present in the AE1 exam, however, they provide an overview of the basic concepts of English grammar, and are crucial in helping students successfully complete courses that are scheduled for their second and third years (e.g. syntax, morphology, etc.) when sentences structures, phrases, word classes and other basic concepts of grammar are discussed. It is worth noting that compared to the language learning methods and activities that students are involved in during their high school years, Foundation is much more theoretical in nature, and as such, it tends to cause students problems and difficulties.

#### *4.3 Instruments*

The interview form was chosen in the hope that students would give more detailed answers and more insight into their studying and learning processes, their attitude and self-awareness about their own progress or lack thereof. The interview was semi-structured with guiding questions to help students reflect on their experiences in a more structured way (see Appendix) but gave students enough liberty to add any related comments or react to each other's comments as well. In their study, Doró and Szabó-Gilinger (2015) had the students fill in a questionnaire about how they evaluated their own performance and they asked some of their instructors to react to the results of the questionnaire. They report that based on the answers the students gave, it seems that they often did not realize that they were having difficulties in keeping up with what was happening in class. Their instructors' reaction to this was that students' self-evaluation was overly positive, which is why their results often did not show their alleged understanding. For this reason, the first part of the interview for the present paper focused on problems of understanding, learning experience gathered during the first year, the problems and the strategies students used to overcome their problems. The second group of questions aimed at finding out more about how they viewed their attitude changes and development during their first year as university students.

## 5. Results and discussion

### 5.1 Problems

Taking Doró and Szabó Gilinger's (2015) previously mentioned results into consideration, students were asked about whether they found it difficult to keep up with what was happening in class, if the homework was particularly difficult and if they struggled with certain topics. The students unanimously claimed that they had no difficulty in being mentally present and doing the required tasks in class. Since during the interview they had the possibility to elaborate on what they meant by "being able to follow what is happening", students also mentioned problematic topics, which were modal verbs, conditionals, inversion, emphasis and applying general rules to specific tasks. The latter is particularly problematic since the aim of the Use of English course is reviewing the topics and further elaborating already known ones as opposed to learning everything from the basics. However, the fact that many of the students pointed out how difficult it was for them to match rules to example sentences or apply them in more complicated texts shows that the foundations they are supposed to build on are often missing or are very weak. Probably for this very reason, many of them concluded that missing classes is not a luxury they can afford if they want to perform better than just reaching the pass mark.

In Foundation students reported that it was sometimes challenging to keep up with the pace at which the new topics came, especially because they almost immediately had to put knowledge in practice. However, it was exactly this practice part that helped them understand everything. They said they tried to understand as much as they could in class but the review and practice at home helped a great deal, and it seemed clear to them that this class requires presence, hard work and a considerable amount of practice, which showed in their results as well, especially during the second semester.

### 5.2 Strategies

Following the identification of problems, students were asked to reflect on the strategies they had used to improve their academic performance. The strategies students mentioned in connection with Use of English can be put in three groups according to their type. One such group consists of activities that were related to managing their studying process, namely increasing the amount of time spent on studying, or starting to prepare for class days earlier than they used to. Some of them also pointed out prioritizing tasks according to the amount of time they required. Some students also mentioned putting more energy into the types of tasks they felt they could actually prepare for (e.g. studying words, because vocabulary exercises seemed more predictable than grammar ones). The most efficient solution, however, seemed to be reviewing the tasks done together in class, as opposed to doing new ones.



The second group of strategies was materials or platforms other than the in-class material itself, such as YouTube, hand-made flashcards, Quizlet or extra exercises. Students especially preferred YouTube videos that explained grammar because the information conveyed through audiovisual input, as they said, tends to stick longer in their memory than an explanation they only read. Extra exercises found online or in grammar books helped in practicing the already known grammar in a new context. Some of them also mentioned looking up verbs and example sentences on their own, saying that personal effort at finding the meaning of a word facilitates memorization. Another popular strategy was writing words down once again, grouped according to some logic, arranged in a way that is easy for them to remember. Vocabulary cards proved to be an excellent way of quickly checking their knowledge, and, surprisingly, more often than not they opted for the paper-based ones, since they require organizing, writing. The fact that they are tangible is also not a negligible factor in studying. Quizlet was useful for studying words in a more interactive way. The strategies that students claimed to use are mentioned by Dóczi (2011) in connection with vocabulary memorizing strategies of Hungarian university students: making a note of the word, saying it aloud, putting it in a sentence, and grouping words. According to her, the more energy and activity a strategy requires, the less popular it is among students. In fact, her results show that among first-year university students making note of a word was one of the most popular strategies, whereas the other three ranked lower. The fact that in the present study students mentioned some of the less popular strategies shows that they are starting to realize that for meaningful studying to take place much more effort is needed and based on the strategies they are using they are headed in that direction.

The third group of strategies for studying was co-operation, which included doing homework with someone else or preparing for the class together by testing each other verbally on vocabulary. Of course, some students claimed that studying alone was the most efficient way to stay focused, but several students mentioned taking comfort in reviewing the material in pairs or groups since more people always mean more points of view which can help them find new ways of studying or seeing things in a new perspective.

As far as Foundation is concerned, the strategies applied by students were somewhat different given the distinct, more theoretical nature of the subject. Students reported having realized by their second semester that studying more often and in smaller amounts made the learning process unquestionably more effective. They also realized that they had to assess the difficulty of the material in order to be able to determine how much time they actually had to dedicate to it. Reviewing their notes shortly after class proved to be useful, and so did keeping track of their mistakes in order to be able to improve their performance when it came to challenging exercises and topics. The strategies used are in line with those reported by D. Molnár and Gál (2019) among university students, namely, planning the time dedicated to studying, controlling effort and metacognitive strategies.

### *5.3 Performance and grades*

Students were asked to comment on whether the effort they put into the subject showed in their end-of-the-semester grade. The majority of students said they were satisfied with their grade, and they provided several reasons why. Most of them mentioned studying and preparing considerably more or exactly as much as they thought was necessary for getting a certain grade. Some even mentioned getting a better grade than they had expected because they were less stressed and did not worry as much as before, but also put more effort into performing better. All of these students, however, regardless of what grade they got, said that they could have performed even better and could have studied even more had they had the time, energy or—at times—the willingness to do so. This was the attitude that helped them become better learners in time, and it shows that the majority of them are capable of determining how much effort and work is needed to achieve a certain result. The question remains whether they actually do. The ones who said the grades did not mirror their effort gave reasons such as not being fully present in class because of the time when it took place (late afternoon or early morning classes). Of course, there were some students who referred to not being lucky enough because they felt they learned just as much as they had in the previous semester and still got a worse final grade. From a teaching point of view, this can be a result of the material being more complex than in the previous semester, and those who learned to manage not just the quantity but also the quality of their studying time may have fared better in the end than those who made no adjustments to their study habits at all.

As far as English Foundation is concerned, the answers are, once again, a little bit different. Students claimed to have received better grades despite having studied less. This reflects the problem referred to above, and it most probably means that they were more experienced in how to study theoretical grammar and how to manage their time better. If their performance was varied, they named irregular preparation as a reason. Naturally, there were also some students who claimed to have studied more and achieved a weaker result; that is, however, likely due to the subject being more demanding than in the previous semester.

One further question was related to whether they had set a goal for themselves and if they managed to achieve it. If they answered in the affirmative, they also reported having succeeded in doing so because they wanted to be better, or at least as good as in the previous semester. Some students said they were very ambitious at the beginning, but, faced with the workload and the requirements, they renounced the set goals. Other students had less clearly defined goals, such as giving the same performance as in the previous semester, being as good as they could, providing a stable performance or, the rarest goal, not to failing the course. Students' answers made it clear that the more specific their goal was, the more likely it seemed that they would achieve it.

The third set of questions was related to linguistic development and changes in self-perception. Students were to reflect on whether they would like to improve their English knowledge in general, not because a subject requires them to, but because they have an inner need for it. All of them thought that improvement and not just stable performance is a must in their current program. They gave a variety of answers, as illustrated by the following quotes:

S1: *I have motivation now because I know exactly what I have to work on.*

S2: *I notice my mistakes now.*

The answers of student 1 and 2 show how they benefitted from two semesters of intensive involvement with grammar, which helped them practice and learn more consciously in the following semester.

S3: *It is natural to want to know more.*

S4: *We need to understand more how the language works.*

S5: *It is not all the same whether I only want to make myself understood or I want to use more complicated structures such as a conditional, for example.*

S6: *I want to be a more conscious language user.*

The answers given by students 3, 4, 5 and 6 mirror their understanding that if they are English majors or future English teachers, it is expected of them and they also expect it of themselves to know the English language much more in depth than an average L2 speaker. A similar attitude has been described by T. Balla and Doró (2015) in their paper on what makes a good teacher. They asked teacher MA students, first-year teacher trainees in the one-tier program, practicing teachers and first-year BA English majors about what a good teacher should be like. One interesting aspect of the answers was that the majority of the first-year BA students, but also more than half of the first-year teacher trainees thought that being able to explain grammar well is an important factor in being effective and good teachers. MA and BA students also added the willingness to constantly improve one's knowledge. The following quotes from the teacher trainee subjects of the present paper seem to support this idea further:

S7: *I would like to go back to the grammar school I studied at, and teach English in a way that everybody understands it.*

S8: *It is important to know the rule behind the linguistic phenomena and not to do things on a whim just because I learned or heard it that way.*

S9: *It would be very unpleasant to realize standing in front of the blackboard that I hadn't learned what I was supposed to back at university.*

S10: *I would like to be able to do exercises just by looking at them, just like when I solve a math problem.*

These wishes delineate the idea of a teacher, of a future self, who has real insight into what language is and understands not only the linguistic phenomena but can also explain the reason behind them. All the answers show that students are motivated to be better at English for professional reasons – either because they want to be very good teachers, or because they believe that the mere state of being an English major requires a deeper understanding of the target language. Some students see grammar classes as opportunities to gain this understanding, which motivates them to perform well and to do conscientious work in and outside class.

Upon being asked whether they had some ideas as to how they could improve their performance and proficiency, they all agreed that doing extra exercises, studying on their own, explaining English grammar to others in the form of tutoring or private lessons, or speaking with other people whenever possible are all effective ways of improving. The majority linked studying with different forms of entertainment, namely reading fiction in English, watching films and TV shows—which most of them already do—researching hobbies in English, watching videos or playing video games. These are habits and activities that Józsa and Imre (2013) also mention in a survey on high school students in 11<sup>th</sup> grade (who are not far in age from first-year students). In their paper, they point out that activities such as listening to music, watching films, searching for information on the internet in English and reading English language books contribute to better language knowledge. In this way, the idea of spending free time involving a foreign language may have come to students from previous experience: all these activities may have contributed to them being English language majors right now, so it is not surprising that these habits would still seem useful in maintaining the level of their English. The students who were at a higher level said that they would benefit most from a trip abroad because it would help them get past existing communication anxiety, and they saw Erasmus programs and CampLeaders Programs as a good way of achieving this.

When asked how they think they developed during their first year, their answers referred to things related to studying, personality and language. They reported becoming more confident, improving their attitude, learning to manage their time better, studying more, learning to prioritize, becoming more responsible and humble, being more efficient and designing strategies that worked best for them to help them achieve their goals. As far as language is concerned, they mentioned being able to explain rules to other people, finding materials to help them study better, and, of course, most of them reported having developed in the four language skills: speaking, listening, pronunciation and grammar. They also felt that their language use was more complex and varied.

## 6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to shed more light on how first-year English language majors at the University of Szeged experience their first year at university and what difficulties and hardships they encounter. On a larger scale a similar interview or survey could help diagnose problems and assess the difficulties students may have during their first year, and, in the long run, may even prevent a few dropouts if problems are noticed and solved in time. The information students provided might help their instructors have a better understanding of what happens outside the classroom and how it develops into the final grades that instructors see. From their answers it is visible that students are actively drawing conclusions and readjusting their concepts of studying along the way. They seem to have better insight into how much their grades depend on their effort and what factors they have no control over. They have goals and they have reasons why they would like to improve, and, last but not least, they have ideas about the ways they could improve their knowledge with the help of extracurricular activities. The question remains whether the extent to which they reflect on their studying process is enough to be successful at completing their studies. The interview form was chosen in an attempt to get more in-depth answers and give the participants the opportunity to elaborate on their thoughts, but this inevitably led to a smaller sample compared to a large number of first-year students at our university. A written questionnaire would certainly provide more information to work with and would be more representative of the whole first year. Future work could concentrate on a longitudinal study in order to identify changes and see trends across different generations. Along with this, interviewing students on their experience in other language-focused courses (such as reading or writing) or in lecture courses (which require quite different study skills) would probably make the conclusions much more detailed and varied.

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## **6. Appendix – Interview questions**

1. Did you have any difficulty in keeping up with what was going on in class? If yes, what? Could you follow the instructions and the explanations?
2. Was the assigned homework challenging in any way? What did you struggle with in particular?
3. Which topic was the most difficult for you to understand? Why?
4. What did you do to improve your performance?
5. How did the weekly assessment affect the studying process? Did it help you or did you feel it hindered your progress?
6. Do your grades mirror the time and energy you put into preparation?
7. How do you study words? How do you study or revise grammar?
8. Now that you passed this course, do you think it is important to aim for a higher level of proficiency? If yes, what do you think you can do to achieve it? If no, why?
9. How do you see yourself after passing the AE1 Exam? What do you think will change in your study habits?
10. Did you ask for help during the semester? Who helped you and how? What was the result?
11. What was the grade you wanted to get in this course at the beginning of your first year? How did it change by the end of the second semester?
12. How do you see your personal development since the start of your studies?